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More electronic eyes join La Porte police force



Officer Bennie Boles checks the License Plate Reader from behind the wheel of his car.

By: JEFF NEWPHER

La Porte Police now have more "eyes" on the streets fighting crime. The additional eyes don't take lunch breaks or vacations. Rarely do they have down time. They are electronic, mobile automated License Plate Readers (L.P.R.).

La Porte Police (LPPD) first acquired an L.P.R. in September 2009. Since it was considered so successful, recently two more were added. Mounted to patrol cars, the "eyes" (cameras) read up to 3000 license plates every hour as they move through La Porte. The eyes are connected to a computer with a database of license plates for stolen cars, unlicensed or uninsured drivers, drivers who may have outstanding warrants or are registered sex offenders in prohibited areas. Although the Department's patrol officers can manually scan license plates during their tour of duty each day, the procedure results in only a few dozen license plates being checked each day.

In a statement, LPPD said each of the automated L.P. R. has the capability of checking a license plate every second. It has made a difference in the hunt for stolen cars, according to LPPD Sergeant John Krueger. "While a statistical claim of percent increase would be inappropriate, given our shift in computer-based record-keeping between 2008 and 2009, it could be estimated that the increase might be as high as 500 percent since it's not likely that we would have recovered these same vehicles at all without the help of the L.P.R. equipment."

The machines remember where and when they "saw" a license plate. Krueger said the city is seeing some unexpected benefits to using the technology. "It's estimated that our L.P.R. usage has resulted in well over \$70,000 in cleared warrants. Of that figure, we estimate over \$10,000 in cash has been paid directly back to the City by the defendants." Other crimes, Krueger said, are also impacted. "As a supplement to the increase in warrant arrests there have been increased controlled substance charges. (LPPD) Officer Bennie Boles has already secured a pair of DWI charges which stemmed from initial L.P.R. notifications."

Cutting edge law enforcement isn't cheap. Krueger said each unit costs about \$18,000. The two newest units were obtained at no cost to the citizens of La Porte. One was paid for with Federal Seized Funds and the other came from the La Porte Municipal Court's Judicial Fund. Other neighboring communities are now using the L.P.R. or planning to acquire the technology.